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FOR RELEASE: Immediate

October 6, 2005

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**Child Advocate Confirms Illegally Detained Children
Released from New Jersey Jails**

(TRENTON) – The State Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) confirmed today that most of the children who had been illegally detained in county juvenile detention centers, while they waited for mental health and child welfare placements, were released to the Department of Human Services (DHS) on or before September 30, 2005. The children were placed by DHS in a variety of public and private residential treatment centers and group homes, and at least one youth was released home with support services.

The news follows a nearly two-year advocacy effort by the OCA which documented the illegal jailing of hundreds of children in the State's 17 juvenile detention centers.

"I am relieved that DHS has made concerted efforts to address this problem, and would like to note the work of the Office of Children's Services to end the illegal detention of New Jersey's children," said State Child Advocate Kevin M. Ryan.

The illegal jailing of youth is a problem of long standing and has been among the most pressing issues for the OCA. In October 2003, Ryan launched an investigation into the conditions faced by detained youth in all 17 county-operated detention centers, resulting in a comprehensive final report in November 2004. That report revealed youth awaiting mental health treatment and child welfare placements lingered longer behind bars than youth awaiting secure correctional placements. Those youth waited on average 59 days, and the highest quartile of youth waited on average more than four months in juvenile detention centers for a mental health or child welfare placement.

At two Assembly Regulatory Oversight Committee hearings this year, Ryan testified that numerous barriers among government agencies had caused children to languish in jails in violation of the law – primarily the absence of a statewide child tracking system, which had prevented DHS from timely identifying adjudicated and disposed children in jail.

This month, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and DHS will pilot for the first time their joint use of a statewide tracking system to identify children in detention centers who are waiting for a DHS service or placement.

“Make no mistake – progress is possible,” Ryan said, “especially when the courts and the child welfare agency work together closely.” Noting that the sustainability of the reform would be critical, Ryan pledged ongoing monitoring and said “this will continue to be a high priority for us.”

“We will continue to vigorously monitor the detention center populations to make certain that reform takes root and that the success we saw on September 30th will be lasting,” said Brian Hancock, Senior Assistant Child Advocate, who coordinates the OCA’s juvenile justice work. “Ensuring the safety of these youth is paramount.”

Over the past two years, Ryan and his staff have visited scores of children in all of the State’s detention centers, and to the best of their ability tracked on a semi-monthly basis the number of children illegally held.

Visits with detained children often provided the best evidence of the need for systemic reform. For example, in July 2005, Ryan and First Assistant Child Advocate Jennifer Velez met with a 12-year-old boy at the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center, where he had been held since December 18, 2004, for receiving stolen property. At the time the police picked him up, the boy had been sitting in a vehicle allegedly stolen by his older brother. The child was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and deemed by the court to need specialized mental health treatment. Because of his youth and mental health needs, the detention center was forced to isolate the child from other detainees most of the time. When asked to describe the worst part of his many months in jail, the boy replied, “I couldn’t see my family that often.”

Four and a half months passed before the boy received his first interview for a mental health placement at such a center. That program rejected him, as did the next program to interview him more than a month later. Only after he had waited in jail for nearly eight months, after numerous court orders and hearings involving numerous agencies within the child welfare and behavioral health systems, was the boy finally released from jail and accepted into a residential mental health program.

“His story is not uncommon. If we have truly seen the last of these long spells in juvenile jails for kids with mental health needs, good riddance,” Ryan said.

Since May 15, 2005, a total of at least 135 children had been held illegally in detention centers waiting for mental health or child welfare placements and services. The OCA observed over the past five months that the number of illegally jailed children continued to decline as DHS hastened the pace of placements, most sharply in September. The information gathered by OCA showed 45 youth illegally held in detention centers awaiting mental health and child welfare placements on May 30th, a number that fell to 29 on June 30th. The number of youth illegally detained was relatively constant through July and August, but fell to 19 on September 15th and, finally, to 3 on September 30th.

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